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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore whether the methods employed by the Cooperative Extension Service in its dissemination of practical skills and knowledge are of help to today's families. In order to examine these factors, two leadership programs for women sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service in Alaska were studied. One group, the Extension Homemakers, has family at its core and a secondary emphasis on leadership and public policy studies. The second group, the Family-Community-Leadership program (FCL), has leadership and public policy at its core with a secondary emphasis on family. These two programs were selected because of the potential stress that leadership development may place on women and their families. The study examined the presence of family strengths as perceived by the program participants in comparison to the length of time and intensity of involvement in the program. Using standardized tests, four independent variables were also examined for their relationship to both family strength and program involvement. Those items were self-esteem, locus of control, spousal support, and type of family. The findings of this research were different than what was expected. Family strength was statistically the same for both groups but higher than the national norm. Self-esteem for both groups was also statistically the same but lower than the national norm. FCL participants had greater internal locus of control, greater spousal support, and more egalitarian families than the homemakers, and vice versa. The duration and intensity of involvement in leadership programs had virtually no impact on the perception of family strength. At the same time, the cumulative effect of participation could be of major concern, and the study concluded that consideration should be given to influences on the family when Extension programs are planned. (KC)

THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAMILY STRENGTH TO SELF-ESTEEM, LOCUS OF CONTROL, TYPE OF FAMILY AND SPOUSAL SUPPORT FOR ADULT WOMEN PARTICIPANTS IN EXTENSION-SPONSORED LEADERSHIP TRAINING

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Readers of popular literature during the 1970s were aware of the concerns surrounding family life and individual development. Numerous articles in both newspapers and magazines pointed to the climbing rates of suicide, divorce, child/spouse abuse, alcoholism, marital infidelity and other apparent indicators of the decline of the American family. However, early work by family life professionals during this time of crisis showed that many families were surviving this period quite well. Studies of those families lead to the development of a set of "survival" attributes which came to be known as family strengths.

In the family studies field, it was once commonly held that both families and society would be strengthened solely by education and other interventions. But, many current interventions for family enrichment deal primarily with hygiene factors, leaving much room for the exaggeration of the benefits of such experiences. Further, family strength interventions must also give attention to helping families learn to become pro-active in building strengths rather than learning only reactive or coping strategies. It is this idea of helping families build their strengths that suggested an examination of programs of the Cooperative Extension Service.

From its history, Cooperative Extension has had a family-oriented foundation. Both subject matter and teaching methods have been approached at various points throughout its history from a holistic family perspective. Reports prepared within the past 40 years continue to emphasize the importance of the family as an institution. Despite an early and strong history of teaching methods that emphasized a systems approach to family needs, efforts to reinstate that approach have been used with only limited success. Generally, family needs are addressed in programs offered by Extension Home Economists who are primarily female to audiences composed mostly of momen.

In light of the research on healthy families in the 1970s and 1980s, the forces working <u>against</u> family strengths, the concerns generally expressed by today's families, and the large evidence in popular opinion polls of the continued need for and support of the family, it seemed pertinent to explore whether the methods employed by the Cooperative Extension Service in its dissemination of practical skills and knowledge are of help to today's families. Extension agents, as professional experts in their fields and as promoters of social change, often assume that the adoption of a particular innovation or participation in a particular program will produce only beneficial results. However, it appears that the future of the families will lie in the relationship between families and their institutions. Responsible institutions therefore, will carefully examine their goals with regard to whether they encourage or cripple the formation of family strengths.

METHOD

In order to examine these factors, two leadership programs for women sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service were studied. One group, the Extension Homemakers, has family at its core and a secondary emphasis on leadership and public policy studies. The second group, the Family-Community-Leadership program, otherwise known as FCL, has leadership and public policy at its core with a secondary emphasis on family. These two programs were selected because of the potential stress that leadership development may place on women and their families. It is possible that by giving women new leadership skills, Extension may alter the family orientation in ways that produce negative or dysfunctional patterns within the family.

An exploratory survey design was selected and for several reasons:

1) The researcher wished to determine the status of specific phenomena within the leadership programs.

2) The subject of the study (family strength) was new and relatively unstudied.

3) There was a desire for a better understanding of the presence of family strengths and the factors relating to it.

4) Methods and research questions useful for a more careful study emerged in the preliminary work.

The study examined the presence of family strengths as perceived by the program participant in comparison to the length of time and intensity of involvement in the program. Four independent variables were also examined for their relationship to both family strength and program involvement. Those items were self-esteem (how the participant sees herself), locus of control (whether the participant sees events as happenings of fate/luck/chance or as a result of her actions or reactions to events), spousal support (the amount of actual and perceived support from the spouse for the participant to be involved in activities outside the home), and type of family (a traditional vs. egalitarian orientation). Where possible, results were also compared to national norms to see if Alaskan women varied at all from women in general.

Nationally standardized tests were used for the independent and dependent variables. The instruments included the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, the Rotter Internal-External Control Scale, the Control Role Attitudes Scale and the Family Strengths Inventory. Scales were combined into a single test booklet and mailed to a statewide sample from the two leadership groups.

All statistical analyses were done using the SPSSx computer analysis program. The instrument yielded interval level data. A significance level of .05 was used in all hypothesis tests. Differences were analyzed with the two-tailed probability for t. Relationships were analyzed using bivariate correlation tables, two-way analysis of variance, and multiple regression, testing for significant T. Prediction of relationships and degree to which variables explain one another were analyzed through both multiple regression and multiple-partial regression testing for beta. Measures of dispersion and central tendency were calculated for all variables.

RESULTS

The findings of this research were different than what was expected. Family strength was statistically the same for both groups but higher than the national norm. Self-esteem for both groups was also statistically the same but lower than the nationl norm. FCL participants had greater internal locus of control, greater spousal support and more egalitarian families than the Homemakers. Extension Homemakers showed greater external locus of control, more traditional families and less spousal support for participation in outside activities than FCL participants.

In correlations of the independent variables, we found that the greater the internal locus of control, the more family strength was perceived to be present. Those who had more internal locus, more spousal support and saw their families as egalitarian generally reported greater family strength.

In a key finding, it was noted that the duration and intensity of involvement in leadership programs had virtually no impact on the perception of family strength, either positively or negatively. A greater correlation was found between type of family, spousal support, family strength and participation in leadership programs than the correlation of participation to family strength.

IMPLICATIONS

1) Since it appears that Extension leadership programming attracts women who already possess certain characteristics, it would appear fruitful to recognize these leadership programs as training grounds. Under such a scenario the program would retain the goals and objectives it now has but embellish these with greater emphasis on the developmental processes experienced by women who participate. Greater emphasis could be given to personal change and recruitment could be targeted to those women whose marital relationship was more egalitarian and whose spouse is more supportive of activities outside the home. Not only would these women be more inclined to participate but would have less difficulty translating their own personal change to the home and family setting, due to the positive support base they have there.

2) The research did uphold the consideration that family strength is complex and unlikely to be markedly influenced by any single factor. Since this research clearly showed no correlation between family strength and involvement in leadership programs by only one spouse, it is difficult to imply that family strain is created by involvement or that special attention should be given to the inclusion of more than one family member. Even though leadership programs for women present some of the more receptive opportunities for creation of family stress in today's society by providing encouragement for women to adjust--if not adandon--their traditional roles, it is hardly fair to imply that participation in such programs will, by itself, create or dismantle strong families.

3) Because controlling for duration and intensity of involvement made no difference in the correlation of family strength with the independent variables, it appears that participation in a single program of the Cooperative Extension Service, or any other social or educational institution, has little, if any, effect on families. At the same time,

the cumulative effect of participation, particularly if little attention is given to family needs, could be of major concern. Where the participant's spousal support and type of family were less supportive of involvement, program managers may do well to direct some attention to skills training that would assist the participants in mediating potential conflict at home. Spousal support and type of family could also be considered when establishing program policies and the mechanics of program operation such as meeting freguency, time and location of meetings, and expectations for program participants in attending these events.

Practically speaking, I would suggest that although this research did not yield the expected negative influence of leadership programs on family strength, those of us in adult education in the public sector would do well to remember that we must exercise good judgement in our use of public funds. Good stewardship of the public trust means continual examination of our programs and our policies to ensure that the consequences of what we do has the impact our audiences need and expect. This is not to say that public agencies should not introduce programs that have the potential for serious social change or that deal with potentially volatile social issues. In fact, I believe that adult educators are in the best position to deal with these types of topics. Rather, these topics must be introduced with care and with adequate attention to support factors keeping always in mind that the garnering of public trust for our educational efforts does not make us omnipotent.

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